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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4677
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2478
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2343
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2925
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0936
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3217
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NEWLY-CONSTITUTED PARLIAMENT HOLDS FIRST
SESSION

11. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet Distribution.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 9, the newly-constituted Mejlis (Parliament) convened for the first time with President Berdimuhamedov in attendance. During the session, the deputies elected the Credentials Committee that certified the new deputies. Upon the President's nomination, the incumbent Chairperson of the Mejlis (Akja Nurberdiyeva) was unanimously reelected to the post. Berdimuhamedov also recommended that five Mejlis committees be established and nominated the head of each committee. The President's involvement at the opening of the Mejlis suggests that there is little chance it will operate as an independent branch of government - not that anyone expected that it would. On the other hand, the reformed body is an initial step in establishing a governmental structure that may one day include independent branches. END COMMENT.

FIRST SESSION OF THE NEWLY ELECTED PARLIAMENT

13. (SBU) On January 9, the first session of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan was held in Ashgabat with the participation of President Berdimuhamedov. The agenda of the session, which was the first gathering of the deputies elected on December 14, 2008, included organizational issues as well as consideration of a number of draft laws. Opening the parliamentary session, President Berdimuhamedov congratulated the newly elected members, emphasizing that the parliamentary elections were held in strict compliance with the new Constitution and became "a landmark on the path of building a secular democratic state."

AUTHORITY OF THE DEPUTIES CONFIRMED

14. (SBU) In accordance with Article 62 of the Constitution, the deputies elected the Credentials Committee that confirmed the authority of the deputies. Maral Paltayeva, Chairwoman of the Credentials Committee, reported that an elected deputy in Mary Province had filed a statement of withdrawal due to family circumstances and said that the elections for the last remaining deputy would take place on February 8. Paltayeva also said that all elected deputies possess a higher education and 8 percent are lawyers, 21 percent are economists, 14.4 percent are engineers, 34.4

percent are educators, 7.2 percent are healthcare specialists, 8 percent are agricultural specialists, and 7.2 percent are specialists working in the political party, labor unions, youth organizations and other organizations. Among the elected members of parliament, six had been reelected twice, three had been reelected three times and three had been reelected four times. 21 elected deputies or 17 percent of the total are women. The deputies are in the following age categories: 6.4 percent are 25-30 years old, 33.6 percent are 30-40 years old, 41.6 percent are 40-50 years old and 17.6 percent are 50 years and older.

ELECTION OF THE MEJLIS CHAIRPERSON

15. (SBU) Although the Constitution provides that the members of Parliament have the right to nominate candidates for the position of the Mejlis Chairman, President Berdimuhamedov suggested the nomination of outgoing Chairperson, Akja Nurberdiyeva, for the speaker's post. The Mejlis then unanimously elected Nurberdiyeva by direct secret ballot as the sole candidate. Addressing Berdimuhamedov and the deputies, Nurberdiyeva expressed gratitude for their high confidence and assured them that she would spare no effort to advance the country's prosperity and welfare, and "the successful implementation of the policy of progressive reforms initiated by the President."

VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE MEJLIS

16. (SBU) Deputy Kasymguly Babayev was then unanimously elected Vice Speaker of the Mejlis by open ballot. Babayev was born in 1966 in Ak Bugday District of Ahal Province, has a degree in economics and has worked as a teacher at various institutions of higher education.

ASHGABAT 00000056 002 OF 003

He served as Vice-Speaker of the previous Mejlis. He also serves as the First Secretary of the Political Council of Turkmenistan's Democratic Party and the Deputy Chairman of the Nationwide Revival Movement.

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS ELECTED

17. (SBU) At the President's request, a resolution on the establishment of five Parliamentary committees and the appointment of their respective chairpersons was adopted. In accordance with the resolution, the Committees for Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms; Science, Education and Culture; Economy and Social Policy, International and Inter-Parliamentary Relations; and Local Representative and Self-Government Bodies were established. Based on the President's nominations, the following committee heads were elected:

Yazdursun Gurbannazarova was elected the Chairperson of the Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms;

Vladimir Gubanov was elected the Chairperson of the Committee for Science, Education and Culture;

Byashim Annagurbanov was elected the Chairperson of the Committee for Economy and Social Policy;

Batyr Berdiyev was elected the Chairperson of the Committee for International and Inter-Parliamentary Relations; and

Gurbangul Bayramova was elected the Chairperson of the Committee for Local Representative and Self-Government Bodies.

18. (SBU) Due to the large amount of work to be done by the Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms and the Committee for Economy and Social policy, the position of Vice Chairperson for these committees was introduced. Murat Atabayev was elected the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms. Yoldash Sheripov was elected the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee for Economy and Social Policy.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE MEJLIS

19. (SBU) In his remarks, President Berdimuhamedov congratulated the

deputies on the historic event - the opening of the new session of the Mejlis, noting that "resolutely advancing along the path of progress and constructive endeavors, Turkmenistan had entered a new important stage of the all-round reforms aimed at laying the solid foundation of the welfare of the country and the high living standards of the people of Turkmenistan." Focusing on the priorities of Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign policies and its development strategy, Berdimuhamedov said that there remain important tasks, particularly to enhance the democratic and legal foundation of the Turkmen state and society. He said that an "incontestable evidence" of Turkmenistan's adherence to the policy of wide democratic reforms was the adoption of the new Constitution and the parliamentary elections held on December 14, 2008 in strict compliance with the fundamental law.

PRESIDENT ENCOURAGES ECONOMIC REFORM

¶10. (SBU) Touching upon the key aspects of the work of the members of the Parliament, Berdimuhamedov said that they were to establish anew the legislative framework regulating the economic, social and cultural policy of the Turkmen state. He called for legislative action that underscored liberal economic reforms and drew the attention of the parliamentarians to updating the legal codes on land and water, and the criminal and civil codes, to make them more adequate and similar to international standards. The President noted that, in implementing economic reforms to improve the people's welfare, the government paid special attention to the well-balanced development of all sectors of the domestic economy and entrepreneurship. He spoke of creating a favorable environment for

ASHGABAT 00000056 003 OF 003

foreign investment, and rendering legislative and state support to development of small businesses. He also touched on agricultural reform, religious freedom, social protection and assistance to families.

MEJLIS' EXPANDED ROLE

¶11. (SBU) Turkmenistan's new Constitution, adopted in September 2008, extended the powers of the Mejlis, giving it authority to amend the Constitution, to set the date for presidential elections, to consider possible changes of the state border, to handle matters of peace and security and to approve the early retirement or removal of the president for health reasons or in case of his violation of the law.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Although the revised Constitution provides legislators with broader powers than before, the President's active involvement from day one in the work of the Parliament indicates that he will remain in charge of this body, just as he has the final word for all elements of the Turkmenistan government. Berdimuhamedov's nomination of the Mejlis' Chairperson, as well as its Committees and their Chairpersons, despite provisions of the Constitution authorizing deputies to do so, underscores that the Mejlis is not in a position to freely exercise its new powers. While the newly-expanded Mejlis may represent an initial step towards establishing separate, independent and functional branches of government, Berdimuhamedov is still clearly in control. END COMMENT.

¶13. (SBU) In contrast with usual diplomatic procedures, representatives of Ashgabat-based embassies and international organizations were not invited to attend the opening of Parliament. No reason was given for this and, as is true for many things in Turkmenistan, we are at a loss to explain it.

MILES